# DETC OCCASIONAL PAPER

# International Academic Equivalence: A Primer

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International Academic Equivalence: A Primer

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This analysis is the result of a of a collaborative effort and series of conversations between Irving H. Buchen and David Le Cornu over the last few months. Buchen wrote the recent DETC Occasional Paper which dealt with the findings of the international involvement of DETC institutions but left unexamined the issue of international equivalence of learning measurement. Le Cornu is St. Clements University's Administrative Director of overseas programs in Africa and Asia and regularly addresses comparability issues. (See more on page 23-24.)

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### Introduction

Surprisingly the search for academic equivalence on a national scale is often as problematical as it is on an international scale. The assumption that colleges and universities that share the same history and culture would also generally share the same common measures of performance and evaluation is not borne out when the test of transfer is applied.

What many American students have sadly discovered is that the transfer process is essentially a courtroom drama played out according to the complex laws of academic equivalence. Like apposing attorneys, two parallel lists of credits and courses are set up in order to determine the extent to which they match. The alignment of these lists is determined by the rules and definitions of each side, but these are not always comparable. The net result is a series of judgments of what is allowed to cross or carry over and what is not. This win-lose findings, which often appear to the student as irrational or arbitrary, is presented as final and without further recourse or appeal.

Imagine then an international situation involving different countries and different backgrounds and histories. Each nation may have evolved its own and sometimes unique higher education system with its own basis of measuring completion and criteria for a degree. Some national legislatures or ministers of higher education examine proposals for licensure of programs scrupulously, often with a knowledgeable eye toward high standards and transfer abroad. Others are more casual, local, inevitably political, and even bribable. The net result is a built-in mismatch. Indeed, often there is not even an agreement as to of what to call the end product. Is the term degree the

same as diploma or certificate or a qualification? Which one is terminal and which one is transitional?

## A Relatively New Problem

The issue of transfer is essentially a modern problem associated with physical, sociological, and electronic mobility. Traditionally, a student finished at the same school where he or she started. Transfer was the exception to the rule.

However, in the U.S. after WWII, the extensive creation of hundreds of community or two-year colleges normalized the transfer process. Thousands of graduates with Associate of Arts/Science degrees (new designations) applied to four year colleges for Bachelor degrees. Over time, even the terms two and four-year were dropped to accommodate another phenomenon—the part time student who required more than two- or four- years to complete. The spectrum of full-time and part-time then acquired a later unique overlay—the adult older learner. Indeed, that last addition particularly intensified the problem of mobility. Adult learners typically were employed and thus subject to job relocation out-of-state, which in turn intensified the issue of transfer.

Although the same pattern, including the creation of intermediate degrees or certificates, was occurring internationally, it generally took place within the terms and designations of each country's higher education system. But all regions also became subject to two other external global modern forces: the multi-national corporation and study-abroad programs.

Companies overseas had to contend not only with foreign language and customs, but also with the credentials of the native employees they hired. Indeed, many foreign professionals attended universities in the home or host country of the corporation so as to avoid or minimize any discrepancies for employment or advancement. Then as a result of faculty and student exchange programs, solely inward-facing academic institutions both in the US and abroad were compelled to become outward-facing as well. Transfer thus became a modern norm.

## Forces for Diversity and for Uniformity

As administrators and faculty wrestled with problems of transfer, they regularly and inevitably discovered a degree of diversity they had never acknowledged before. Transfer became translation. Australian grades of High Distinction, Distinction, etc. had to be given American equivalents of A, B., etc. Credit given for courses in the UK was based on both in-class and out-of-class study, whereas in the US it was based solely on in-class time so that it could be more precisely monitored. And so on and so on.

What also became more explicit are the many factors driving diversity and keeping institutions apart:

- 1. Unique national history and culture: Even when overseas offspring emulated ancestors, American-styled Oxfords soon took on new American ways and thus compounded general diversity.
- 2. Faculty insularity: Program design and terminology are guided and constrained only by faculty perceptions of the needs of the

- discipline on the one hand and by a replication of their own academic experience on the other hand. Typically, little or no attention is paid to student transfer.
- 3. Continuity and tradition: Academic institutions are notoriously conservative and move according to glacial time. Resisting change is even a rallying call to arms. Being faithful to and holding the line of academic tradition is often regarded as a sacred duty. Thus, difference and diversity are called upon to oppose the modern pressures of cultural uniformity and philistinism.

What are some of the counter-vailing forces favoring uniformity?

- 1. Mobile students: The needs of the new mobile students not only dramatized the transfer issue initially, but also continued to exert pressure for great standardization in transfer policies.
- 2. National accrediting agencies: U.S. federal accreditation agencies set up regionally to oversee academic institutions and to insure protection of students. The establishment of federal agencies was followed by the creation of DETC, a national accrediting agency for distance education. Although accreditation does not compel uniformity, it exercises a soft compliance regime, asking institutions at least to justify any major differences. Such consistency is also required when native universities go abroad.
- 3. Transnational standardization: Currently, the EURO confederation is coordinating an effort to create an accrediting body that would facilitate the transfer of students from one European country to another. When it appears and begins to

operate, it undoubtedly will become a major regional model for uniform transfer access.

- 4. Political oversight: State boards and systems of higher education in U.S. and their national counterparts aboard exercise a moderating influence on all the public academic institutions within their jurisdiction. They are joined by state legislatures which approve university budgets. The distribution of tax dollars is often leveraged by elected officials into a watchdog role. Indeed, as noted below, Michigan State, like many state system universities with a strong commitment to public service, not only support but also exercise leadership with respect to transfer causes.
- 5. Professional certification standards: Various national and international certifying professional bodies exist that set standards for a number of specializations. Indeed, in the general absence of international equivalents, is probably one of the best and in many instances the only way of insuring international uniformity of standards.

#### **Solutions Sources**

The number and the difficulty of the problems posed by equivalence should not obscure the existence of many solutions. Happily, a review of these solutions also provides an occasion for acknowledging the availability of a number of problem-solving sources.

For major informational sources were tapped.

- 1. First, contacts and conversations were made with a number of professional organizations who offer credentialing and transfer evaluations. These are the preeminent and knowledgeable experts in the field. Many indeed offer training workshops for university admissions officers and corporate HR personnel involved with international enrollments and/or hiring. One in particular, Educational Credential Evaluators (ECE), is also involved in research publications on generic credit and program equivalence as well as the profiles of individual countries. Such publications are valuable resources that should be in the library of every academic involved in international exchange.
- 2. Another key source is the consultants used by American and overseas accrediting agencies who are often called upon to provide guidance in matters involving difficult cases of international equivalence. Many are also researchers in the field, usually differentiated by their country and/or program expertise.
- 3. A direct source is the admissions professionals with overseas universities. They possess great expertise of their involvement with not one but several associations with a number of UK or Commonwealth institutions
- 4. Their American counterparts are to be found in universities with extensive overseas programs and partnerships. Often such directors or coordinators are as invaluable and knowledgeable as the experts in professional credentialing agencies. In some instances, they are more adept, because like academic administrators, they are required to navigate and to undertake turf management between two or more distinct higher education systems, and at the same time to soothe faculty egos.

What follows below essentially reflects consensus positions of the above sources.

# Organizational and Negotiated Solutions

The complexities and problems of international equivalence are so formidable, mysterious, and labyrinthine that they have led to a number of major developments which have also served as solutions to the problem of equivalence. Each development will be described, followed by an evaluation of the solution offered.

#### 1. Equivalency Organizations

The first is market-driven and converges two needs. Because the pressure for clarity and validity is so urgent on the one hand, and the process of finding and defending equivalence is so complex and varied on the other hand, professional organizations have appeared offering equivalency services for a fee.

Although initially American-based, all professional organizations now are international. They generally serve four clients: individuals, academic institutions, employers, and government agencies (especially immigration). All clients seek the same assurances of credibility and comparability. Minimally, a number of determinations are offered: Are the claims of the individual or case true or not? Are they also comparable and equivalent to American standards, and if so, in specific terms? If not, what are the gaps? Although recommendations are frequently sought and offered, final acceptance is always left to those institutions requesting and applying the service.

But who in turn certifies the certifying agencies? Assurance takes three forms: experience of its professionals (e.g., previous admissions experts); a transparent process that employs acceptable and verifiable standards; and most importantly, accreditation by the National Board of Credential Examiners.

Typically, credentialing agencies require from applicants bona fide copies of transcripts and documents. They usually take two weeks for analysis, and charge an individual fee of between \$250 to \$500.00 (USD) depending on the complexity involved. For university or business clients who use their services regularly, the cost per case is usually adjusted to a flat across-the-board lower rate or volume discount. This especially applies to universities to whom thousands of students apply each year from universities abroad. In effect, the university, rather than hiring and maintaining its own internal experts, outsourcers the task. In many cases, the student is asked to pay the fee directly to the credential agency or it is passed on in student charges.

**Solution Evaluation:** There is no question of the value of such agencies as acceptable arbiters on an individual or outsource basis. It minimizes both risk and costs. Even for those institutions that perform their own evaluations, the credentialing agencies still can serve as a critical backup, last resort, or check and balance system, especially for difficult cases. In short, such agencies thrive and their services enjoy high demand precisely because the international situation is not only complex, but also unresolved.

#### 2. Local and Regional Articulation Arrangements

This second solution is employed by those institutions directly affected. It is a do-it-yourself elimination of the middle man credentialing service. It recognizes the existence of transfer and equivalence gaps but seeks to bridge them between frequent partners in one of three ways.

Many U.S. community colleges, whose students regularly apply to state universities, have grouped and compiled a comparability pattern of their own programs and courses. This checklist is based on their experience of what the receiving university will accept and at what level of equivalency. It is then issued and annually updated to all its students planning to transfer as a series of recommended guidelines of what courses they would be wise to take.

Another way goes one step further and involves direct negotiation and course-by-course agreement with receiving universities. An articulation agreement is then offered as an official and approved bridge between both institutions. Finally, in a number of cases, some state boards of higher education have stepped in to simplify the process. The degree itself is deemed sufficient for transfer acceptance.

**Solution Evaluation:** This desirable solution requires a number of pre-conditions which may limit its application. It has to take place between institutions in the same region or state system; it needs to be favored by the key state agencies and legislatures; both sending and receiving schools have to agree to the benefits of a win-win situation; and the happy outcomes of the rites of passage is contingent on the student following the course guidelines, degree guarantee of

admission not withstanding. Indeed, often the matching process still takes place, only this time after, not before, acceptance. The wisest course then is to recognize that the carte blanche acceptance of degree is not a substitute for following the recommended guidelines of courses and credits in the articulation agreement.

The solution requires a substantial degree of like-to-like matching and is less a matter of mutual enlightenment and more a case of coercion or mandate from without.

But what emerges clearly is the value of negotiation. Based on past patterns, however, the goals initially should always be modest. The focus should be on reducing, not totally eliminating, gaps of equivalence. Over time, trust and familiarity may expand the parameters of agreement but differences may never disappear.

Finally, if a number of partners are involved and negotiation with each is time-consuming and produces uneven results, two other advance strategies may be employed.

The first is to determine to what extent all partners have common characteristics. Sometimes the task is made easier when they are members of the same class of institutions, such as a commonwealth of universities, or are strongly regulated by the same host country or associations. Happily, in many cases developing countries are linking approval of their educational programs to outside accreditation sources or agencies. This improves credibility on the one hand and enhances uniformity on the other hand.

The second strategy is to develop an outline of a generic program as a basis of negotiation. This again would seek minimum, not maximum, coincidence. A new or revised degree program would be designed from the outset as an interfacing template. It would carry variations and equivalent issues routinely in the margins as negotiating points. Aligning and following the patterns of professional certifying associations might produce at least a solid initial semblance of international comparability as far as key specializations were concerned. The net result would be a generic and international MBA or MIS program with sufficient comparability to be universally accepted by many or all involved.

Gradually, as such negotiations take place, and to the extent they are known and shared, the cumulative effect internationally might result in a much better balance between commonality and difference, uniformity and diversity, sufficient enough to minimize the handling transfer issues on a case-by-case basis.

#### 3. Global Individual Partnerships

The advent of study abroad programs, especially requiring two-way or reciprocal student and faculty exchanges, have resulted in the direct discussion and negotiation of prerequisites and transfer credit. Participating individual universities had to agree on what courses minimally were needed to make the exchange or study abroad meaningful. That naturally led to making sure that the classes taken abroad would be transferable back to the institution from which the student would ultimately receive his or her degree. It should be noted in passing that no matter how extensive the negotiation of courses and even programs, the granting of the degree still remains sacrosanct and nonnegotiable.

**Solution Evaluation:** It is critical for faculty to participate in such negotiations. Indeed, what often has facilitated such negotiated agreements is the direct face- to- face discussion of faculty from the participating institutions involved. In this instance, the obvious value of like-meeting-with-like was focused on sustaining a global dialogue based on shared course and program expertise. But less obvious was the general value of faculty recognizing that they often design courses and curricula from their own singular, professional, and national point of view, often without regard to issues of international transfer. They often ignore comparability in an increasingly interoperable global world. As a result of interfaculty discussions, such faculty later became more sensitive to the issue of whether new courses or programs would be compatible and comparable with the curricula in other institutions.

The net result of such involvement is the gradual creation of a new kind of faculty and expertise: hybrids that are both national and global. It might serve as the academic version of dual citizenship. Such faculty also would become more responsive to their participation in programs that cut across not only different institutions but also national boundaries. Indeed, such global consciousness has led to the formation of the newest creation: multicountry consortia.

#### 4. Global Consortia

Although the names vary—Global Alliance, Global Connections, Global Derivatives, etc.—they all share a number of common denominators, some familiar and some new.

They are all multiple—many universities, many counties, many programs, etc. Although saddled with the same problem of equivalency, they are generally now more inclusive and international from the start. Often that is helped along by the design of new programs, such as ecological ones, that did not exist before, or the overlay of existing programs with an international and/or interdisciplinary range that imparts the novelty of a blank slate. Indeed, curriculum development within the context of global consortia may turn out to be a major new force for international comparability negotiated from the start by hybrid faculty. It also may provide a much needed shot-in-the-arm for lagging multi-disciplinary studies, which clearly will be a major form of inquiry, study, and practice in the 21st century,

Although some global consortia are still based at one university with many partners, separate importance and status have been given to the consortium approach as signaled the appointment of senior level administrator. For example, New York University recently announced a search for an Executive Director of Global Operations to head up its new Office of Global and Multicultural Affairs.

Typically these consortia are international versions of regional or national programs. In fact, their common rationale is to negotiate a global academic interface, or as one group called it, an international marquee.

Two new members have joined the consortia: multi-national corporations and electronic universities. Business, which is increasingly global in scope, needs to hire graduates from institutions all over the world. They need assurances that graduates are comparably and uniformly educated, trained to qualify for future

placements later, when they are transferred to different location in a different country. So now global partnerships between universities have been expanded to include businesses as well. What is currently missing, but may appear in its wake, is the addition of international professional organizations of specialists.

The other new partner and driving force is distance education universities, which are exclusively or largely electronic and employ a global web-based delivery system. Indeed, the capacity of computers to link institutions has been enhanced by the compilation of international databases. For instance, Michigan State University has created a Global Access program. This database is unique in that it is searchable by a combination of categories such as world region or individual country, thematic area or program, constituency group, and resources. The database thus acts as an international inventory of educational opportunities.

Following in the wake of the establishment of global consortia is the emergence of global dialogue about addressing the problem of international accreditation of Internet universities. Thus, "eLearn Accredit" created a global forum in 2002 to sustain electronic exchange focused on establishing an international marquee.

**Solution Evaluation:** The most obvious value of these new global groups is their conception at the outset as consortia. They not only put together all the current traditional players in accreditation, but also include the new ones. In addition, what has emerged clearly is their determination to avoid reinventing the wheel. From the start, they begin by identifying and building on existing arrangements and agreements, especially those put in place previously by study abroad and exchange alliances.

Clearly, it would be beneficial for individual universities to join such consortia and thus enjoy their collective benefits. But if for various reasons that is not possible, it would be important to track their progress and achievements for emulation. The hope is that these consortia will cluster and evolve into a global federation or consortium of consortia that would facilitate the addition of global accreditation to their agenda of negotiation and the direct involvement of existing American accrediting commissions, their international academic counterparts, and professional societies of specialists. Although global accreditation may be far off, it has been brought much closer by the creation of such global consortia.

#### Pausing to Take Stock of Current Solutions

A summary may be in order at this point. Although four examples of solutions were described and evaluated—others could be added as confirmation—the situation boils down to two options: turn over equivalence to outside certified experts, or directly negotiate differences.

The goal of negotiation realistically should never be to attain total equivalence. Rather, the focus should be on reducing or reining in questionable diversity and developing sufficient areas of commonality and comparability to manage effectively transfer equivalence. Such agreements would eliminate or substantially limit the need for case-by-case deliberations. Intractable situations could still be turned over to credentialing agencies.

Happily, negotiated agreements and articulation arrangements that have already occurred provide a number of guidelines before

undertaking future negotiations and/or for revisiting those already in place. Here is a consensus summary checklist:

- 1. Homework is necessary prior to negotiation. It requires identifying what is held in common and what constitutes the gaps to be bridged.
- 2. Develop early on a generic and anticipated version of the outcome.
- 3. That the design of articulation arrangements should enjoy substantial convergence from at least these three sources: recurrent program patterns and practices by universities here and abroad; alignment with certifying standards of international professional associations of specializations; and finally, outcome acceptance by recognized accrediting agencies.
- 4. Involve pertinent faculty directly in the negotiation. Charge them with a leap-frog mission: "while we are catching up, let us also get ahead." Specifically, use the negotiating leverage of a blank slate to press for an interdisciplinary range either as a new venture or as a revised overlay of existing programs. Novelty frequently can carry the day and overcome territorial obstacles.
- 5. Finally, communicate, share, and disseminate the outcomes, especially the convergencies of generic program design and of resultant transfer equivalence.

# Moving Ahead by Taking Stock of the Basic Building Blocks of Constants and Variables

Creating a negotiating agenda inevitably involves the basic building blocks of transfer equivalence. There are two kinds of building blocks: First, the identification of constants that remains reasonably consistent throughout all cases and applications, and second, the identification of key variables that inevitably complicate the picture these variables are then defined and rendered in ways that make them at least manageable in most cases.

Because the complexities and diversity involved preclude absolutes of any kind, the building blocks below focus on the constraints in transfer equivalence and how variables are managed. The four basic building blocks examined are credits, courses and course distribution, grades, and degrees.

#### Credits

- · A credit is a unit of time.
- · The time designates course completion time.
- · One credit equals 15 hours of course time.
- · A three credit course requires 45 hours per semester.
- · A multiplier must be introduced for semesters shorter than 15 weeks.
- A 3 credit semester course may have to become a 4 or 5 credit course for both to total the same 45 hours of instruction.
- But whatever the length of period of study, credit as a fixed unit of time remains constant.

#### Courses

- Determining credit is a quantitative or qualitative judgment.
   Sometimes it is both. The host university fixes the number of credits on each course, ranging from zero (no credit) to 8 credits.
   A university may assign a low or high value depending on the importance with which it regards the course. Thus, a three credit course at one university may be a two credit or a four at another. To preclude equivalence becoming solely or primarily a mechanical process where credit allocation for the same courses exists, inquiry and negotiation usually focuses on the reasons for the difference. This negotiation often takes the form of exchanging syllabi and text selection.
- 2. Another important distinction is whether the course is considered an elective or a required course, or a lower or upper level course. Credit equivalency may not be altered but clearly transferability is affected. If the course is considered an elective and not a required course, then additional courses and credits may have to be taken to make up for what has been disallowed as a transferable equivalent. Solution: The only way to eliminate or minimize such discrepancies is to be aware of the credit distribution values of the other university systems with which you seek compatibility, and design your own program accordingly.
- 3. Another variable affecting transfer comparability is distribution of courses for individual programs, majors, and specializations. Often, outside accreditation especially of the major itself favors consistency. But again, the recommended antidote is to compare designs and distribution requirements and to offer generic version.

#### **Grades and GPA**

Some universities fix a grade level as a condition of transfer or equivalency. The standard generally is 3.0 (out of 4.0) or a B or better. Again, the preventative approach is to require minimally a 3.0 for courses in their major offerings. Some universities also stipulate a GPA for awarding of the degree. If that GPA meets a minimum threshold, that level should be matched or exceeded.

## **Degrees**

What has complicated the problem of degree equivalents is the creation of a number of new intermediate degrees or diplomas. As a way of ministering to and retaining part-time and adult learners, institutions have developed a number of new designations that are paradoxically both intact and transitional. They are stand-alone but also bridges to pursuing final full-fledged degrees. They are called certificates, diplomas, qualifications, etc. The American Associate degree also served the same double purpose and is thus comparable to the UK diploma.

The major challenge affecting degree proliferation and nomenclature is the need to provide for focused and structured professional development, especially by employed adult learners. Rapid workforce change requires not only substantial updating through continuing education, but also an entirely new or different programmatic direction and configuration. Thus, even the student who already has completed a basic or advanced degree may find that he or she needs additional competencies for work compliance and advancement. That mandates further education and training.

A good example is Project Management. Not usually available or justifiable as a total program, Project Management is made available in the form of a four-course certificate program. In addition, the courses in this case have been designed in accordance with the course recommendations of the Society for Project Management and thus are intended to facilitate sitting and passing the Society's exam for national certification. Such certificate programs may be offered as stand-alone or as incentives to transfer into an advanced degree program by the application of the four courses of the certificate program.

Academic institutions are experiencing the same pressures to change and to reinvent themselves as their students. Increasingly, they are being asked to be bifurcated organizations facing inwardly and outwardly at the same time. The internal track consists of the core degree focus, replete with more or less the traditional courses and course distribution. This track is pretty much fixed. The external is in flux and accommodates a number of add-ons or extenders which are further applications and adaptations of the core curriculum to specific fields. Often, they are also ambitious cross-overs to other core areas or newly emerging ones.

The net result is a reconfiguration of programs and universities. The standard organizational chart of vertical colleges with individual departments nested below and within may have to accommodate a new overlay. Each degree program may have to be imaged as a core tree with many external branches and applications. Some may even cross over or reach for a connecting bridge with other trees and/or their branches.

This new interactive and unfinished form is both program-specific as well as university-wide. By being both, universities can maintain their core integrity on the one hand but also sustain and minister to the changing external complexity of new research developments and emerging markets and environments or the other hand. Thus, the branches will serve to keep institutions and their students current. As the need for supplements increases, such add-ons may be constantly in flux, with courses and programs replaced by new ones without dislocation of the essentials.

The risk is that program proliferation might add to degree proliferation. The threat of degree proliferation might be by the addition of such designations as a MBA Plus to signify the successful completion of an additional or extended application of core knowledge. To be sure, some enterprising institutions may advertise their degree programs with a lifelong warranty, and consequently will need to offer updated courses to alumni at reduced tuition levels. Although that may appear to be an educational variation of a frequent flyer program, what it embodies is what every university has always traditionally maintained: commencement marks the beginning, not the end, of education.

# Program Design: Next Steps

When creating new programs or revising existing ones, institutions must serve three masters: accrediting agencies involved; the various higher education systems in which this program will coexist, and finally, the credit, course and course distributions, grades, and degree specifications of professional societies of specializations.

How shall all that be made operational? In four steps:

- 1. Follow the guidelines above for creating a generic program as a template, with built-in equivalence issues positioned in the margins.
- 2. Set up a negotiating agenda and timetable which is initially modest and achievable.
- 3. Involve faculty with a the potential of interdisciplinary hybrids.
- 4. Finally, accept and base these programs on the new configuration of the university as both core and circumference.

### **About the Author**

**Dr. Irving H. Buchen** is a member of the faculty of IMPAC University and Capella University. A long time national and international consultant, Dr. Buchen has also helped to design both online and traditional academic programs for a number of foreign universities in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. He holds a Ph.D. in Communications and Business from The John Hopkins University, an M.A. degree in American Civilization from New York University, and a B.A. in English and Journalism from New York University. Dr. Buchen is on the doctoral business faculties at Capella University, and is certified for online teaching and course design. He has taught full time at Cal State, the University of Wisconsin, and Penn State University. His teachings include a variety of graduate courses. He has authored more than 150 scholarly articles and eight books; his most recent book is "The Future of the American Workforce" due to be released in May 2005.

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